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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in small Wisconsin cities, this paper addressed two broad issues: First, how do non-white ethnic groups survive in their majority white environments? And second, what creative support systems have emerged from within these groups or from the interested efforts of non-minority community leaders? In the first part of the paper, problems that Southeast Asian refugees face in Wisconsin are reviewed; areas discussed include employment, language and adult education, racism, and cultural misunderstanding. This is followed by an assessment of the challenges that this ethnic group has presented for the small cities in which they have resettled; problems include demographic shifts, changes in service delivery, financial costs, and changes in community relations. Next, the primary ethnic support system used by the Southeast Asians and their advocates, the Mutual Assistance Associations, is described. The purpose, structure, location, and program activities of these organizations are outlined, and sources of their funding (state and local governments, voluntary agencies, and the private sector) are detailed. Finally, recommendations are offered for the development of similar support systems for any ethnic minority located in a small city. (GC)

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Ethnic Minorities in Small Cities: Organizing Support Systems

The Case of the Southeast Asians and Mutual Assistance Organizations

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The small city has played an important role in the successful settlement of minority groups in Wisconsin. Although one traditionally views the area north of Madison and Milwaukee as predominately white, the 1980 U.S. Census indicates that there are a significant number of non-white ethnic enclaves located in all of the small cities in Wisconsin. According to the U.S. Census (1980), these ethnic enclaves range from less than 100 persons to several thousand.

How do these ethnic groups survive in their majority white environments? What creative support systems have emerged from within these groups or from the interested efforts of non-minority community leaders? This paper will attempt to address these issues focusing specifically on the experience of the Southeast Asians, the newest ethnic minority in the stage.

An overview of the specific problems faced by Southeast Asian refugees in small Wisconsin cities will be presented first followed by an assessment of the challenges this ethnic group has presented for the small cities in which they have resettled. A description of the primary ethnic support system used by the Southeast Asians and their advocates, the Mutual Assistance Association will be covered in detail. This section will focus on the purpose, structure and program activities of these organizations. The last section of this paper will offer recommendations for the development of similar support systems for any ethnic minority located in a small city.

PROBLEMS FACING REFUGEES AND THEIR HOST COMMUNITIES

Southeast Asians initially came to Wisconsin during the massive refugee settlement program which began in 1975. In hopes of avoiding excessive financial hardship on any given area of the United States, refugees were dispersed throughout the country as sponsors were recruited by voluntary social service agencies. The wisdom of such a policy of dispersion is questionable in retrospect, but it did

successfully resettle these immigrants in areas where often the other minority groups had never settled. Unfortunately, between 16% and 45% of the original refugees left Wisconsin within a year to seek employment or join families elsewhere in the country. (McInnis, 1981:38)

For those who have remained or have been joined by family mebers from other states, the long arduous task of building a new life is well underway. Of the 12,841 Southeast Asian Americans in Wisconsin, 63% have regrouped to form sizable ethnic communities in Green Bay, Appleton, Oshkosh, La Crosse, Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Wausau and Eau Claire, outside the major metropolitan areas of Milwaukee and Madison. (Wisconsin Resettlement Assistance Office, 1984; 1)

Obstacles to Integration

Several serious problems have confronted the Southeast Asians, all of them common to ethnic minorities in small cities. Lack of employment, poor provisions for adult education, vicious racism and cultural misunderstanding are among the most critical.

Employment. Employment problems have posed a major obstacle to refugee resettlement. Inappropriate job placement or unstable employment experiences are perhaps the most critical factor in successful refugee resettlement according to McInnis, (1981). Finding a job was not difficult for the refugee upon arrival. Most frequently the initial job had been pre-arranged by the communities involved in the resettlement effort. However, in small cities crippled by recent economic conditions, the opportunities for continuing training or advancement have been severely limited. These labor force problems have resulted in both high public assistance usage and chronic unemployment.

A second component of employment related problems is the difficulty of translating refugee occupational skills into the American job market. Those workers who had high status jobs in their homelands could often not practice these skills due to differences in certifications, training and education standards.

(Stein, 1981:26) Remedial programs for these professionals are expensive and scarce in small cities, resulting in an all too frequent "brain drain" to urban areas.

Adult Education. Clearly the inability to speak English is among the most debilitating problems facing adult Southeast Asians. Children have learned English quickly in the school system but in the small city English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs for adults are more difficult to implement. This is due partially to the fact that many of the older Southeast Asians are illiterate in their own language, making structured ESL programs minimally effective.

General living skills are a second aspect of the need for adult education. For many refugee women the modern American kitchen was totally overwhelming after the simple facilities of the refugee camps. Drivers education, the American supermarket scene and public transportation are among other areas in which a significant need emerged in the area of adult education.

Racism. Although its expression is subtle, racism has been, and continues to be, an obstacle to integration by the refugee families. Certainly anti-Asian sentiments persist in all sized communities but are somewhat more pronounced in smaller cities. (Starr and Roberts, 1981:53) The time at which the Southeast Asians arrived exacerbated existing racist sentiments. The refugees were a constant reminder of the humiliating defeat in Vietnam and the death of many a native son.

The issue of racism, be it real or perceived, is strongly associated with why so few-non-white ethnic minority groups have settled in small cities in Wisconsin. Small cities in Wisconsin show a general solidarity and "sameness" both their greatest asset and most serious liability. This solidarity may actually ostracize those perceived as outsiders, due to lack of cultural understanding (Ginsberg, 1976:92)

Cultural Misunderstanding. Minority scholars point out that two distinct patterns emerge among minority groups when adapting to their environment. Acculturation, the first pattern, is broadly defined as maintaining one's ethnic identity as a focal point of life, incorporated into a greater life perspective. Assimilation, on the other hand, involves relinquishing ethnic characteristics to become indistinguishable from others in a majority environment. (Devore and Schleslinger, 1981:150)

Second and third generation European immigrants have found it relatively easy to assimilate because of similar physical traits. However, the Southeast Asian immigrants are distinctly different from these earlier immigrants. Primarily, Southeast Asians are not voluntary immigrants. They were forced out of the country for both political and economic reasons.(Montero, 1979:636) Secondly, the Asian culture is vastly different from the American culture, representing not only physical differences but philosophical differences as well. (LeXuan and Vandeusen, 1981:49) These dissimilarities have the potential to constantly frustrate the efforts of citizens to encourage true assimilation of the refugees when acculturation was perhaps the Southeast Asian family's primary goal.

Cultural practices and customs are slow to disappear and it is questionable as to whether it is desirable that they ever disappear. Simple lack of understanding about religious practices, dietary habits, child raising practices and extended family living arrangements have been sources of much social tension between Southeast Asians and the residents of small cities. (Starr and Roberts, 1981:54)

Challenges to Host Cities

Small cities have also been impacted both positively and negatively by the refugee resettlement, requiring both the Southeast Asians and small city governments to make significant adjustments. Stanford Research Institute 1983 Report

to the Office of Refugee Resettlement outlined four major impacts on resettlement host communities; population shifts, changes in the structuring and staffing of services, economic costs and changes in community relations.

Population Shifts. During its early phase, the refugee resettlement program encouraged wide geographic dispersion of Southeast Asians to minimize the economic impact of the refugees on any single location. However, in the last three years, major migrations have occurred. Families and clans separated by the original resettlement have regrouped to form sizable enclaves in once minimally impacted areas. Most of this migration has occurred among the Laotian Hmong, who for the most part represented a less education, less skilled group than the Vietnamese, hence required a greater number of services. Housing, shortages, unemployment, especially among the unskilled, and heavy demands on the educational and social services resources resulted from these population shifts. Small cities struggling with the crippling economic recession found the influx of a sizable "foreign" population especially difficult. Juggling limited resources with high demand raised serious questions about displacement and inequity in service delivery to existing needy populations.

Changes in Service Delivery. Public agencies have faced immense adjustments in the structure and staffing of services in highly impacted areas. County Departments of Social Services have had to be expanded to process income maintenance claims while at the same time restructured to include bilingual workers. The difficulties involved with both expansion of a civil service structure during a period of fiscal retrenchment as well as recruiting qualified bilingual workers is self-evident. Unfortunately, the present income maintenance system does not respond quickly to such a need. County Departments of Social Services have relied heavily on bilingual workers employed by the State of Wisconsin or voluntary agencies working with refugee resettlement, a finite resource for a seemingly infinite demand.

The educational system has been caught totally unprepared for the demand for bilingual education. The results have been hastily constructed ESL programs to augment regular education curriculums.

Local Job Service Offices have also experienced heavy demand. In a time of high unemployment, low skilled non-English speaking refugees have been extremely difficult to place. There is little question that enployment services have, and continue to be, most seriously impacted by the ethnic enclaves of Southeast Asians which have formed in small cities.

Costs. Due to extensive needs and a few resources, refugees have incurred significant costs for the communities in which they have resettled. For the first eighteen months in this country, refugees are covered by the Refugee Cash Assistance Program, heavily subsidized by the federal government for the states. This program provides income support for refugees who meet the income and asset limitations of Aid to Families with Dependent Children but not the family composition requirements. However, the state and local communities assume the cost once eligibility for this program has expired. The result has been high levels of welfare dependency among refugees who have not been able to achieve self-sufficiency in the eighteen month period.

Additional costs have been incurred by local health departments in view of the heavy demand on medical servies, due to poor health among refugees. High fertility rates among refugees have resulted in high demand for immunization and well baby services as well home health care services for infirm aged refugees.

Changes in Community Relations. A new low income minority population settling in a small city always creates changes in relations within a community between majority and minority groups, between agencies who are responsible for provision of services and between existing businesses and new ethnic business enterprises.

In many small cities in Wisconsin, the Southeast Asians represented a totally new racial group. This group was in direct competition for jobs and services with

existing low income populations making some conflict inevitable. The majority white population has feared the economic drain on local communities as well. The fears of both of these groups and the lingering resentment of the U.S. involvement in Indochina have strained relations between host communities and their new residents.

Although private sectarian agencies have spearheaded the resettlement effort, many of the responsibilities of service provision have fallen on public agencies. Both sectors have been actively involved in solving the problems of the refugees but the dilineation of "turf" responsibilities remains blurred.

Refugee business enterpreises are a relatively new venture in small cities but show great promise in the area of economic development. Whether these businesses will be welcomed or resented by the business in small cities remains to be seen.

This overview clearly identifies problems that exist for both the Southeast Asians who settle in small cities and for those host cities as well. These problems have not proved insurmountable. Due to the creative efforts of the refugee communities, their host communities and the State of Wisconsin, the Mutual Assistance Association development has prospered. Mutual Assistance Associations (MAA's) have significant inroads in exploring solutions to these problems. The next section of this paper explores the MAA and its role in organizing ethnic support systems in small cities in Wisconsin.

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATIONS

Due to the chaotic circumstances surrounding their migration, the Southeast Asians initially experienced a great deal of social anomie, upon their arrival in the U.S. In an attempt to regain some sense of extended family and community, refugees often moved several times to be closer to friends and family. In Wisconsin, many Vietnamese moved out and thousands more Laotian Hmong moved in during this period of heavy migration.

Once ethnic enclaves were established, the refugees looked for a more structured effort to coordinate their activities and to begin to implement long range planning efforts. In addition to meeting cultural needs, refugee leaders addressed the importance of pooling economic resources to both meet immediate need and to encourage economic development in the form of refugee businesses. The result has been the formation of the rapidly growing Mutual Assistance Associations.

Structure of the MAA's. Although MAA's differ throughout the country in terms of the extent of their formal organization, most MAA's in Wisconsin have incorporated as private, not for profit organizations. Such organization has been critical in facilitating the application for public funding and in legitimizing the organization in the host community. The observations and comments which follow refer specifically to this type of MAA, not those for whom social and religious activities are the primary function.

MAA's of this sort have a Board of Directors which is predominantly Southeast Asian, an essential part of involving the refugee community. These Board members are representative of both the overt and covert leaders among refugees, as well as other influential members of the community. Many MAA's have placed representatives of local Job Services and the local political community on their boards to encourage cooperation within the community. The majority of MAA's in Wisconsin have refugee Executive Directors and American office managers, who serve as another vital link to the host communities. Additional staff members are usually other educated refugees or those who are competently bilingual.

Leadership of the MAA's. Leaders within the MAA, be on the Board or in the position of Executive Director come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are religious leaders, therefore commanding cooperation and respect from the refugees by virtue of their position within the religious communities. Some are leaders who have emerged by virtue of their economic success or who, because of occu-

pational considerations, are respected by the community. Most common, however, are those leaders who occupied high ranking positions in the military in Southeast Asia. These individuals are most idealized for their dedication to the homeland, their bravery during prior military conflict and knowledge of political situations.

One of the most pronounced problems in the leadership of the MAA's is that often any conflict is actually a power struggle between clans and families whose origins date back to Southeast Asia. If a power struggle develops, it may be intensified when those leaders identified by the refugee community are not the same leaders who have assumed leadership of the MAA's because of their ability to communicate and circulate within American communities. These "assimilated" refugees are frequently accused of selling out to the Americans and consequently may face a struggle to retain their leadership roles in the refugee community.

Funding. In Wisconsin, MAA's have received a majority of their funding through two specific federal programs which require state matching funds. The Mutual Assistance Association Incentive Grants fund four MAA's with The Highland Lao Targeted Assistance Initiative funding the remaining organizations. Both sources require significant matching funds from federal and state social services budgets as an indication by the states of both philosophical and administrative commitment to the development of MAA's.

MAA's file formal applications for the funds directly to the Refugee Resettlement Services Office, located in the State of Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services Office. They are required to provide cash or in-kind matching funds, for an indication of community support and interest.

Broadening their financial base in anticipation of the time limits imposed by federal funding has been of critical concern to developing MAA's. Several funding sources have been used with varying degrees of success in Wisconsin:

1. Purchase of Service Contracts with County Departments of Social Services. Some highly impacted areas have decided to use the MAA's for actual service delivery due to the inability to expand the civil service system or because of the lack of expertise in specific areas of refugee need.

2, Community Development Block Grants. These funds have been secured for the primary purpose of economic development within refugee communities.

3. Private Foundations. Small cities in Wisconsin with prosperous industry, for example the paper industry, have met with some success in securing limited funding from private foundations.

4. Church donations. Congregations of all denominations who have been active in the resettlement effort since its inception have in many cases, continued to offer some level of financial support to the refugees in their congregations.

5. The Campaign for Human Development. Operated through the dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church, these funds have been used for various service delivery systems.

6. Voluntary Agencies. In-kind contributions from voluntary social services who have always taken an active role in refugee resettlement include office space and in some cases staff and secretarial support.

7. Volunteers/Federal Employment. Recently additional resources have been used by the MAA's in the form of VISTA workers and older low income workers employed under Title V of the Older Americans Act.

Location of MAA's in Wisconsin. Of the 12,841 refugees in Wisconsin, 63% are located outside of the major metropolitan areas of Milwaukee and Madison. There are enclaves in Brown County (8% of the total), LaCrosse (8%), Eau Claire (5%), Sheboygan and Manitowoc (9%), the Fox River Valley area (10%) and Wausau (6%). The attached map indicates the distribution of refugees in Wisconsin and the location of the MAA's, which are identified by a star on the map.

Nationally, MAA's tend to follow a similar pattern although many communities with sizable refugee populations have difficulty organizing MAA's, retaining funding and encouraging participation by the individuals for whom the MAA was organized. The final section of this paper deals with important considerations in the development of MAA's which can help to avoid failure.

MAA Activities. The actual services provided by MAA's through Wisconsin vary significantly. By nature of their structure and organization, MAA's are highly responsive to local demand, therefore their services are most often a good reflection of existing need. Interpretation, information and referral, health screening, social services and advocacy are major foci of most MAA's in the state. Some provide pre-ESL training programs especially for those refugees

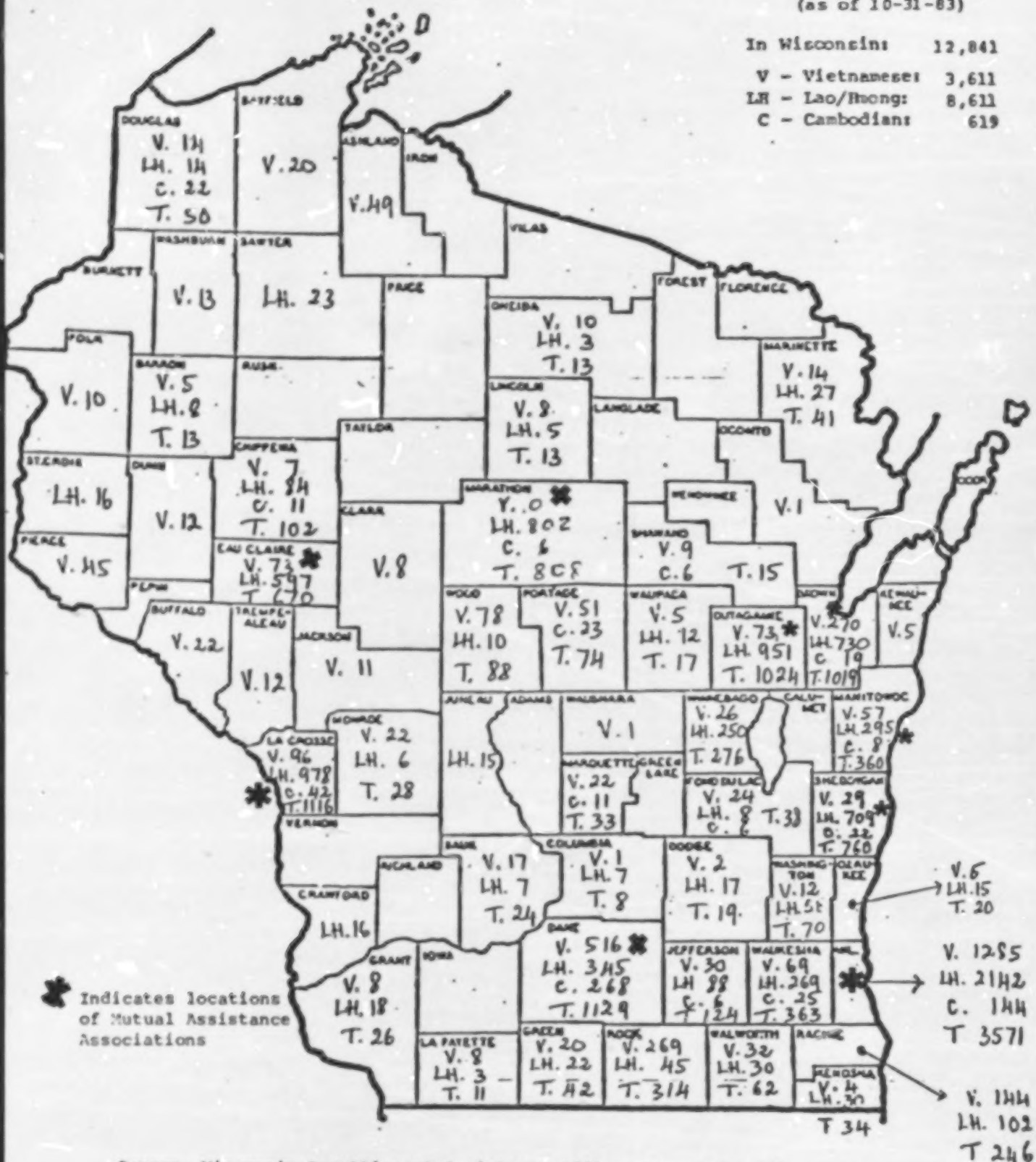
January, 1984

Location of Southeast Asians in Wisconsin

In the U.S. : 661,900
(as of 10-31-83)

In Wisconsin: 12,841

V - Vietnamese: 3,611
LH - Lao/Hmong: 8,611
C - Cambodian: 619


DOUGLAS V. 14 LH. 14 C. 22 T. 50
V. 20
V. 49
IRON
VILAS
BURNETT
WASHBURN V. 13
SAWYER LH. 23
PRICE
FOREST
FLORENCE
ONEIDA V. 10 LH. 3 T. 13
MARINETTE V. 14 LH. 27 T. 41
POLK V. 10
BARRON V. 5 LH. 8 T. 13
RUSK
LINCOLN V. 8 LH. 5 T. 13
LANGLADE
OCONTO
ST. CROIX LH. 16
DUNN V. 12
CHIPPEWA V. 7 LH. 84 C. 11 T. 102
TAYLOR
MARATHON V. 0 LH. 802 C. 6 T. 808
MENOMINEE V. 1
SHAWANO V. 9 C. 6 T. 15
DOOR
PEPIN
EAU CLAIRE V. 73 LH. 597 T. 670
CLARK V. 8
PIERCE V. 45
PORTAGE V. 51 C. 23 T. 74
WAUPACA V. 5 LH. 12 T. 17
OUTAGAMIE V. 73 LH. 951 T. 1024
BROWN V. 270 LH. 730 C. 19 T. 1019
KEWAUNEE V. 5
BUFFALO V. 22
TREMPEALEAU V. 12
JACKSON V. 11
WOOD V. 78 LH. 10 T. 88
JUNEAU
ADAMS
WAUSHARA V. 1
WINNEBAGO V. 26 LH. 250 T. 276
CALUMET
MANITOWOC V. 57 LH. 295 C. 8 T. 360
MONROE V. 22 LH. 6 T. 28
LA CROSSE V. 96 LH. 978 C. 42 T. 1116
LH. 15
MARQUETTE GREEN LAKE V. 22 C. 11 T. 33
FOND DU LAC V. 24 LH. 8 C. T. 38
SHEBOYGAN V. 29 LH. 709 C. 22 T. 760
VERNON
SAUK V. 17 LH. 7 T. 24
COLUMBIA V. 1 LH. 7 T. 8
DODGE V. 2 LH. 17 T. 19.
WASHINGTON V. 12 LH. 51 T. 70
OZAUKEE
V. 6 LH. 15 T. 20
CRAWFORD LH. 16
DANE V. 516 LH. 345 C. 268 T. 1129
JEFFERSON V. 30 LH 88 C. 6 T. 124
WAUKESHA V. 69 LH. 269 C. 25 T. 363
MIL.
V. 1285 LH. 2142 C. 144 T 3571
GRANT V. 8 LH. 18 T. 26
IOWA
LA FAYETTE V. 8 LH. 3 T. 11
GREEN V. 20 LH. 22 T. 42
ROCK V. 269 LH. 45 T. 314
WALWORTH V. 32 LH. 30 T. 62
RACINE
KENOSHA V. 4 LH. 30
V. 144 LH. 102 T 246
T 34
Indicates locations of Mutual Assistance Associations

Source: Wisconsin Resettlement Assistance Office, Department of Health and Social Services, State of Wisconsin. January 1984

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for whom illiteracy in their native language is a problem. Business development is a more recent focus, but one which promises to be one of the more exciting projects presently underway.

Duplication of existing services has been a concern for small cities who host MAA's. As part of the funding procedure, the State of Wisconsin requires that MAA's demonstrate that any proposed activities do not duplicate services.

State advisors in Wisconsin strongly believe that it takes from three to five years for an MAA to stabilize both organizationally and financially. This unfortunately falls outside of the scope of the traditional three year federal funding limit. A proposal is now being considered by the national office of Refugee Resettlement to allocate future funding on the basis of the number of new refugee arrivals to a state. This proposal fails to recognize two important factors in the process of refugee resettlement. First, the number of refugees entering the U.S. has declined drastically since the original wave due to a decline in sponsors. Secondly, secondary migration has stabilized to some degree, which may reduce the number of refugees moving into states from another location. The refugees who have established permanent homes in a state are still needy and rarely do individuals or MAA's achieve the desired self-sufficiency within present federal time limits. Unless a "hold harmless" provision is incorporated into the MAA allocation funding formula, the stability of funding for both existing MAA's or new MAA's is questionable. (Wisconsin Resettlement Assistance Office, 1984:1) This point is raised primarily because loss of some outside federal funding could seriously curtail the scope of activities that MAA's presently participate in and threaten their very existence.

ORGANIZING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The Wisconsin experience with Mutual Assistance Associations has identified several factors critical to other states and groups who are attempting to develop

similar support networds for ethnic minorities of any type in small cities throughout the country. This final section outlines suggestions for the development of such support systems based on the Wisconsin experience.

1. Identify leaders within the minority community. Strong (and interested) leadership is critical in the planning and development of ethnic support groups. Due to other cultural factors, leadership within a community may have little to do with ability. Among foreign born ethnics, leadership may be more realistically based on former positions in the homeland, wealth, personal charisma, occupation or family position. Those self-proclaimed leaders who appeal to the majority American population may not be true representatives of the power structure in the ethnic community. If the minority or majority organizers upset the traditional community structure their efforts are most likely to fail.
2. Allow ethnic groups to identify their own needs. Needs assessment studies done to ethnic communities as opposed to with them are likely to reflect majority perceptions only. Ethnic support groups must reflect the concerns of the group itself about its own well-being in order to assure cooperation among members. If the majority community sees employment programs as the primary need and refugees see ESL as an important precursor to getting a job, most likely both programs will fare poorly.
3. Focus on both short and long term economic needs. Although meeting the immediate service needs of refugees is an important concern, focusing on long term economic development is even more critical. Long term economic self sufficiency of both individuals and the MAA's offers a permanent solution to economic problems. The provision of technical assistance to fledgling ethnic business and the development of specialized small business loans are among the many activities that can be directed towards the long range goals of economic solvency of minority communities.

4. Diversify funding sources. Federal funds because of time limitations should be viewed only as seed money but not relied on for long range planning. Local United Ways or Community Chests, purchase of service contracts, foundation grants, demonstration projects and other funding sources should be explored early in the development of the organization.
5. Use existing community structures to facilitate development. A sense of "we-ness" is a natural phenomena among refugees and ethnic groups, and should be capitalized on in developing support systems. Churches and schools should not be overlooked in the initial development stages. These institutions are legitimate social institutions in ethnic communities whose involvement may offer further legitimatization of the MAA's that develop in conjunction with them.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic minorities have presented both a challenge and reward to the small cities in which they have settled. As is the case in Wisconsin with Southeast Asian refugees the pressure of population shifts, changes in service delivery systems, economic dependency and changes in community relations have forced small cities to respond in creative although difficult ways. In the spirit of cooperation, refugee communities have helped ease these pressures by organizing to meet their own needs through the development of Mutual Assistance Associations. The model of MAA's in Wisconsin discussed in this paper offers an example for other small cities who face similar challenges of ethnic and minority populations. Cooperation and sensitivity to ethnic diversity, as well as long range planning efforts are the keys to success in this organizational effort.

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